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WHAT IS A QUAKER PASTORAL THEOLOGY, AND HOW IS IT ENFLESHED / EMBODIED IN COMMUNITY?

PHIL BAISLEY

By definition, pastoral theology sets theology in context. It's theology with hands and feet attached. In this article I will first address Friends' theology and then the hands and feet part.

One May morning about eighteen years ago, I was teaching a class called The Friends Pastor to a half-dozen Earlham School of Religion students. I wanted to establish some common ground among those students who hailed from various yearly meetings, all within the boundaries of "programmed" or "pastoral" Quakerism; so I began by asking them to identify what beliefs are held in common by the highest percentage of Friends throughout the world. Unbeknownst to me, in the classroom next door, Steve Angell (Leatherock Chair of Quaker Studies at Earlham) was teaching a class called Ministry Among Unprogrammed Friends. Steve also was attempting to establish common ground by asking his students what central beliefs unite Friends of all traditions.

While adherence to Friends testimonies received some mention by both groups, the Quaker belief identified by both classes that may be shared by most Friends, whether programmed or unprogrammed, whether in the Americas, Africa, Asia, or Europe, was in the immediate presence of God in worship. It is this belief that informs every part of Friends' faith and practice; I believe it is the foundation of Friends pastoral theology.

I see Friends' theology clearly depicted in Doyle Penrose's painting of the *Presence in the Midst*. It's an image that seems to unite most of Quakerism. You'll find a print of it hanging in settings as diverse as England, Kenya, and Ohio. Some Friends might call the spectral image Jesus, another Spirit, another the Divine

Presence. But what the vast majority of Friends agree on is that “God” is present *and active* in our meetings.

The adjective I use to describe Quaker pastoral theology is *Presence-driven*. Every aspect of ministry that happens in a Friends meeting reflects this, and this is where the theology is embodied. Consider worship. Presence-driven worship is found not only among unprogrammed Friends, it is also foundational to worship among those Friends who have adopted the pastoral system.

Most programmed Quaker meetings include some element of “waiting” or “open” worship in which the same process is followed as in unprogrammed meetings; the difference is often only in duration. In Presence-driven worship, Friends gather in silence and listen for the Spirit. They *expect* the Spirit to be present and to participate in meeting. If the Spirit gives a message valuable for the entire group—or a significant part of it—the person to whom that message is given speaks. If, for some reason, the present Spirit does not speak, then neither do the people.

Well, what *about* speaking in meeting? Historically among Friends, certain folks have been recognized for their gifts in vocal ministry. In many meetings there were “weighty Friends” from whom it was not uncommon that messages regularly came. Pastors fall into that category among programmed Friends today; however, pastors follow—or *should* follow—the same constrictions as everyone else in meeting: don’t speak unless God gives you something to say. And what God gives you to say may come on Sunday morning in worship, it may come during the week at the coffee shop where you write your sermons, or it may not come at all.

In my book, *The Same, But Different: Ministry and the Quaker Pastor*, I have a chapter about preaching. In it I recount stories of times when Spirit has changed the message or the messenger even in the middle of a meeting for worship. That happens because it is the Divine Presence driving the meeting, not the pastor.

Presence-driven work is another aspect of Quaker pastoral theology. Quakers do church administration differently than the Presbyterian church down the street. Why? Because we expect the

Divine Presence to guide our decision-making. We don't say book-end prayers at the beginning and ending of our business meetings. The entire *meeting* is an act of worship and prayer.

Quakers do evangelism and outreach differently than our Baptist sisters and brothers. Why? Because we don't believe the Spirit is something to be injected into empty souls. Rather, we see this world and its peoples infused with the Spirit of Christ; with whom we mutually respond as we "walk cheerfully on the earth."

Presence-driven pastoral care becomes a ministry of the entire meeting rather than the effort of a paid professional because Friends believe the same Spirit inhabits both the caregiver and the care-receiver. The roles are often interchangeable.

I could go on, but you know where I'm heading. That Presence is in the midst of everything we do in pastoral theology because that Presence is in the midst of who we are. And this is where embodiment *in community* comes in.

Quakerism doesn't work individually; it works in community. I had this vividly demonstrated to me by a Sufi friend in Turkey a few years ago. This gentleman, Halil, contacted the Quaker Information Network because he wanted to explore Christian mysticism and had been reading about Friends. ESR's assistant dean Tim Seid, who at that time presided over the Network, gave me his contact information since I'd been to Turkey a couple of times. I was planning to be in Istanbul later that year anyway, so I told Halil I would swing down to Izmir and meet with him in person.

I stayed with Halil and his wife, and we talked about Quakers. At the end of my first evening there, Halil walked me to my room and declared, "Tomorrow morning at 9:00 we will have Quaker worship." And we did. We gathered in silence, and about twenty minutes in, Halil gave a message. It was wonderful.

When I left a couple of days later, Halil and I agreed to meet online once a month for Quaker worship. After a couple of strained long-distance worship attempts—this was before Zoom—we stopped. Halil summed it up, "If I want to sit alone and meditate,

I don't need to be on my computer with you." I agreed. What we were doing was *not* Quaker worship. It was individual meditation with laptops on.

Quakerism is always embodied, enfleshed, *enmeshed* in community. The Presence is in the *midst* of something. The Light may be in me and you individually, but the Presence is found where two or more are gathered. COVID-19 has pushed our communal boundaries for sure, but you and I know that some of those Zoom worships were real worship because *we were gathered*.

From those gathered meetings, local or virtual, Presence-driven stuff happened. We worshipped. We prayed and preached. We answered that of God in others. We took care of meeting business. We organized social action events. We were able to do it because we truly believed the Divine Presence was with us, in us, activating us, together.

I believe this sense of Divine Presence, coupled with the necessity and testimony of community, along with our non-credal stance and commitment to social justice—in other words, the heart and hands and feet of Quakerism—make our Society poised to be a real influence in contemporary America and the world.

Of course, taking seriously the idea of God being actively present in our lives and meetings may put us at odds with other faith traditions, especially American Christianity. I experienced this not too long ago when I began a new pastorate. My preferred office is a table at a local coffee shop, so I was delighted to find a warm, inviting establishment near the meetinghouse. I began spending my Tuesdays there. Next door is a consignment shop featuring creations by area artisans. They also have a small book department.

I visited with the owners the first Tuesday I was in town. They were delighted to hear that I was an author, especially one who writes for the Christian market, and they said they'd love to carry my book and even have me do a signing there. They asked for five copies of *The Same, But Different*, which they'd sell on consignment after I agreed to have a meet-and-greet with shoppers. I left a copy with them in the meantime.

I brought the books the following Tuesday. The owners had changed their minds. It seems that after reading the book they felt it was too “out there” for their customers. They thought the stories were interesting, but they didn’t think shoppers would relate to some of the Quaker ideals of ministry.

Fact is, when pastors follow Quaker ideals they *are* “out there.” New generations may be longing for an unmediated connection with the Divine, a faith based not on “blessed assurance” but on holy questioning, but a lot of Christians cling to the status quo. Stepping into the pulpit with the attitude that your sermon may be wrong for the audience or the moment is difficult to grasp if one is used to messages wrapped in pastoral authority. What may be a strength in relating to those outside the Society may be a weakness when it comes to the prevailing religious community.

Still, we continue to embody in community what is the core of Quaker pastoral theology. We worship, we work, we preach and teach and serve knowing a Divine Presence drives us. Together. As Friends.